

### Lincoln Dreamt He Died: The Midnight Visions of Remarkable Americans From Colonial Times to Freud

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## Review

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**Burstein, Andrew** *Lincoln Dreamt He Died: the Midnight Visions of Remarkable Americans from Colonial Times to Freud*. Palgrave MacMillan, \$28.00 ISBN 9781137278272

### The Role of Dreams in Understanding Great Men

Historian and author, Andrew Burstein, brings considerable expertise and clout to his latest work, *Lincoln Dreamt He Died: the Midnight Visions of Remarkable Americans from Colonial Times to Freud* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). Currently the Charles P. Manship Professor of History at Louisiana State University, Dr. Burstein's eight previous books – *Madison and Jefferson*, 2010 [coauthored with Nancy Isenberg], *The Original Knickerbocker: the Life of Washington Irving*, 2007; *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello*, 2005; *The Passions of Andrew Jackson*, 2003; *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, 2003[coedited with Nancy Isenberg]; *Letters from the Head and Heart: Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 2002; *America's Jubilee*, 2001; *Sentimental Democracy: the Evolution of America's Romantic Self-Image*, 1999; and *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist*, 1995 – highlight his credentials as an active and energetic scholar. The titles also underscore his expertise with the cultural developments of the early republic.

Dr. Burstein has also advised noted documentarian Ken Burns for his production "Thomas Jefferson," and contributed to publications like the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, and Salon.com. Guest appearances on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* and *The Diane Rehm Show* testify to the broad appeal of Dr. Burstein's work.

Described by two-time Lincoln Prize winner Douglas L. Wilson as "one of the most original and readable historians in our midst," Andrew Burstein embellishes that accolade with *Lincoln Dreamt He Died*. He goes beyond merely chronicling events in the United States from the early republic to the twentieth-century, examining the subtler aspects of the philosophical, spiritual,

and intellectual movements that framed the mindset of the American people.

Divided into three parts spanning from 1800 to 1900, with captivating illustrations, and supported by an impressive array of memoirs, letters, private papers, diaries, journal and magazine articles, and substantive secondary sources, Burstein's thoroughness of effort is evident. The compelling issue providing the motive force for his first-rate study zeroes in upon one question: "When it comes to inner states, and to their personal issues, were they [i.e. early Americans] like us?" (xiv) A rich mine of evidence is presented to demonstrate that, aside from the obvious differences of their respective material realities, Americans of the early republic *did* have much in common with their contemporary descendants. This is especially true relative to matters of their "inner states" and "personal issues". The focused scrutiny Burstein gives to the material lives of early Americans underscores the extent to which their outer conditions affected, and were affected by, their interior selves.

Burstein's masterful analyses of the significance of early Americans' dreams, how they were interpreted, the meaning of dreams in larger society, and how dreams were perceived by physicians and scientists, emphasizes the importance of dreams to citizens in the fledgling republic. The degree to which people either embraced or lampooned dreams (and their interpreters), the actions taken in response to dreams, the link between dreams and the Divine, illuminates the morays, values, attitudes, beliefs, and philosophies that, in their own nuanced but impactful way, guided the cultural trajectory of the United States. For as much as it was (and is) a nation of buildings, roadways, commerce, and thriving human activity, the United States was (and is) also an expression of ideals, laws, social norms, and a unique American character. That character, like dreams, may not be tangible but it has framed the organization and progression of American life.

Luminaries like Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a leader in the American Enlightenment [the American counterpart to the European Enlightenment whereby social leaders shifted allegiances away from absolute authority in favor of revolutionary ideas, scientific rationality, religious toleration, and experimental political organization<sup>1</sup>], "constantly interrogated memory . . . speculating on all that gave rise to sensations and visions". (24) This helps modern Americans comprehend "how people of his [Rush's] generation lived and acted, imagined and obsessed." (24)

Throughout the work, Burstein employs a writing strategy that intuitively responds to the likelihood of reader skepticism regarding such an esoteric subject. Rather than attempting to clarify with precision the variable, ever-shifting meaning of dreams, he makes frequent reference to those who dreamt and the material uncertainties of their world. Laboring within a reality where human life was absolutely vulnerable, and death was a frequent and tyrannical intruder, they sought comfort and meaning in their nightly visions.

This is not an illogical leap, for contemporary Americans are well-acquainted with the intertwined nature of their physical reality and their mental health. The same held true for early Americans whose existence was organized in a far different manner. Early Americans “confronted a less busy soundscape . . . . Their homes were poorly insulated, and their sleep habits differed markedly . . . . They retired earlier and woke after what they termed ‘first sleep,’ which meant rising after midnight and sitting alone with one’s thoughts . . . before returning to an even deeper sleep.” (26).

Burstein does a tremendous service in contrasting the lives of early Americans with those in the twenty-first century whose senses have been overwhelmed with incessant noise pollution. He notes that “Night, sometimes called ‘shutting-in’ was part of an emotional inheritance we have all but forgotten.” (26) People had to be more vigilant. Darkness was synonymous with danger on a scale larger than most moderns can comprehend. People knew every inch of their habitations and fire, which brought light, warmth, and comfort was also the source of disaster, destruction, and dislocation. (26 – 27).

Burstein’s vivid descriptions regarding life’s utter fragility from the early republic through the nineteenth-century builds a robust foundation for explaining the imaginings and dreams of those generations. In both Europe and the United States, the ascendancies of science and rationality caused significant socioeconomic and political changes, but such advances were as likely to unleash forces imperiling human life rather than facilitating its preservation. Referring to “Angel Dreams . . . wherein the dreamer received a glimpse of heaven and hell,” Burstein reminds the reader to “Think of the church-bell ringing as funerals took place in every community. This was their world: burying children, burying neighbors.” (44)

The pervasiveness of death. The capricious harshness of life. The primitive state of medical science that was compounded by practitioners [like Benjamin Rush] who refused to admit their limitations. (152) These, along with the usual lethal threats of war, environmental disaster, poverty, disease, starvation, and slavery, left people desperate to make sense of their very brief and difficult lives. Societal norms dissuaded them from overtly sharing their inner thoughts, but it did not mean they were “distrustful of emotion so much as they” sought to find “a moral vocabulary more accessible than an emotionally laden one.” (51) Burstein provides valuable insight into the tender nature governing the expression of such intimacies. The “reality of frequent early death predisposed them to prize personal memory. They thrived on their social encounters, sent their thoughts, wrote and shared, and kept careful records.” (51) Living at a time when medical science could not offer citizens even the fanciful hubris of an occasional triumph over death, “life’s fragility was implicitly understood. Partings were intense, and the tactile pleasure of a letter set hearts beating.” (69) People “folded keepsakes into stored correspondence and preserved locks of hair for generations as a soft reminder of one whose physical presence could be reclaimed in no better way.” (69)

As much as industrialization, Manifest Destiny, sectionalism, and economic panics, Americans and their dreams, and the fact that they dreamt, described the social fabric and persisting existential unpredictability of the nineteenth-century. Literati like Washington Irving did “more than anyone else in early America to normalize, as well as sentimentalize, the dream.” (122). Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*, the “village good for nothing” (122) who lost twenty-years of his life through dreams and drinking, symbolized the risky power of dreams and life’s temporality. The abysmal pace of medical advancement led many to “return to superstition” as means of helping them “find consolation.” (129) Cultural giants like Ralph Waldo Emerson “who in tangible ways incorporated his dream experience into a philosophy of life”; Nathaniel Hawthorne “who saw dreams only as symbols of man’s failure to live well”; and Henry David Thoreau who “ruminated often on the potential of dreams,” left enduring legacies to America’s cultural identity and evolution. (132, 136, 137) Then came the cataclysm of the America Civil War (April 12, 1861 – April 9, 1865).

When addressing subjects as widely covered as the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln, any contemporary historian faces the daunting task of finding new intellectual ground to till. Burstein does so with understated elegance and power. The carnage of nineteenth-century America’s most bloody and transformational

event plunged a death weary society into deeper, darker musings about life and its fleeting nature. President Abraham Lincoln, “a very active, suggestible – even superstitious – dreamer” was well-suited to the time. (195) His upbringing had produced in him a proclivity whereby he “could be encouraged or he could be undone by his dreams, convinced that there was much to be made of them.” (196) President Lincoln was not alone, however, in being alternately shaped and shaken by his dreams.

Burstein asserts that the reaction of the Civil War generation to that conflict’s sweeping calamity was expressed in “the letters and diaries” of “enlisted men, wives, [and] sweethearts” and “families caught between the warring sides, and hapless prisoners enduring miserable conditions.” (201) The final consummating act of the war’s bloody demands was Lincoln’s assassination. According to the President’s “great friend Ward Hill Lamon,” Lincoln had mentioned a dream of his impending demise, prompting Lamon to implore the President to take special precautions. Lincoln’s fate is well-known and while Burstein appropriately questions the veracity of Lamon’s recollection, he nevertheless acknowledges that the “martyred president repeatedly dreamt of an ‘indescribable vessel’ heading for a safe port” which said to him “that the war was going well.” (220) Having woven a splendid tapestry allowing readers to peer into the intimate cultural spaces of early America, Burstein, reflecting on Lincoln, offers the tantalizing assertion that “Maybe – just maybe – he dreamt he died.”

Andrew Burstein’s *Lincoln Dreamt He Died: the Midnight Visions of Remarkable Americans from Colonial Times to Freud* is a work of exquisite accessibility regarding a subject that is inherently evasive. It sheds much needed light into the dusky cultural spaces of the early republic, helping readers better understand the people of that era and their modern descendants.

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<sup>1</sup> See the following: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/amer-enl/>. Accessed on January 23, 2014. This information is extracted from the online Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.